

The Science of Sentiment

By

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of Master of Arts.

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The focus and significance of my studio work lies in the state of the human condition, the delicacy and fragility of the human construct in an emotional and physical sense. My work has always spoken of the psychological phases one experiences during despondent times. My experience is that of being part of an extended family that has endured a history of cancer and high mortality rate. As I have become more aware of my family's history with illness through the examination of my memories, I have also become wary of the future and empathetic of the past. My thesis exhibition, The Science of Sentiment, is an examination and reflection of the memories, emotions, and anxieties caused by my family's history with cancer with an emphasis on the relationship between human biology and human emotion.

"Sometimes it is as difficult to know what the past holds as it is to know the future, and just as an answer to a riddle seems so obvious once it is revealed it seems so curious to me how that I passed through all those early moments with no idea of their weight." (Grealy 1994)

When I was a child, death seemed commonplace in my family and one might have thought our familiarity with local funeral homes and hospitals odd. It's strange thinking back to my childhood, I never thought it abnormal the number of fatalities in my family. When I was 19 my younger cousin passed away in a car accident and I had asked my then boyfriend to come with me to the funeral. He had admitted that he had never been to one before. This was when I realized that all of the funerals and all of the hospital visits might not have been the part of everyone's existence. As

I grow older I become more aware of my family's medical history. I have examined my memories with great detail and have come to the understanding that cancer is a disease that has been plaguing my family for generations. I have lost a great deal of my family due to this relentless foe.

"Sometimes the briefest moments capture us, force us to take them in, and demand that we live the rest of our lives in reference to them. " (Grealy 1994)

I vaguely remember my paternal grandmother's fight with cancer and her passing from lymphoma in 1992. I was only seven years old, but I remember the hospital visits and being frightened by what cancer had done to her body. My Uncle Bud, who was also diagnosed with lymphoma, died in 1998 and my Uncle Dave followed him in 2004.

My mother's parents both passed away from cancer. My grandfather died of lymphoma on Christmas Day when my mother was seven. My grandmother was diagnosed with breast cancer when my mother was in her teens. During all of this my mother, at 19 years old, became pregnant with me and married. My grandmother passed away in 1986, right before I turned one year old.

In November of 2011, my Uncle Mark passed away at the age of 63, after a five-year battle with cancer. With his passing, I began to consciously examine my feelings and I also made it a point to watch how my other family members reacted in this time of crisis. I witnessed the most honest of emotions at his funeral. I watched the attendees viewing my uncle, taking note of the large range of emotions felt. Some went directly to the casket to pay their respects and others seemed unable to even look at his body on display. Some seemed content with the idea that he was at

peace, and others were distraught with the thought that he was gone. When the director was speaking about my uncle's long battle with cancer, my cousin Matthew erupted in tears. I hadn't seen that much emotion from him before, and from that point forward it was like it couldn't be held back. The sorrow he felt was as overwhelming as the cancer that took his father's life.

As I have become more aware of the role that cancer has played in the lives of my family, I often wonder if there is anything I can do prevent myself from developing it. I attempt to be proactive in my health and I wonder if even these actions will be effective. I struggle daily with the question of whether this insidious foe's cause is genetic or environmental and either way I feel an inherited sense of dread that leads to hopelessness, for there seems to be a certainty that I will be diagnosed with cancer one day.

My thesis exhibition is a response to the sense of dread and hopelessness I have developed due to my family's medical history and the emotions felt in times of loss. The Science of Sentiment consists of three tables dotted with small glaze cast heads leading the viewer to an isolated illuminated figure on the other side of the gallery. The three white tables represent my past, present, and future. The figure represents myself and the fears and anxieties I deal with on a daily basis. The past encompasses my memories and family history with cancer, the present reflects what I recently experienced with my uncles passing, and the future stands for my wariness of what lies ahead for me.

I chose to light the tables dramatically and color the tops white and the legs black to recreate the sterile and eerie atmosphere of an examination room. Situated

on the tables next to each head are magnifying glasses. These invite the viewer to closer examine each “specimen” or memory just as I examined each of my experiences with cancer, illness, and loss. I have employed these magnifying glasses as strategy to force the viewer to make the connections needed for them to fully understand what ties the heads and the figure together. They also disconnect the viewer from the object, making the surface suddenly separate from the piece itself and allowing the viewer to make discoveries of their own.

The small heads on the tables hold layers of meaning. They are arranged to stand both individually and collectively. This symbolizes how, although we each experience pain independently, we all share the same suffering as an existence. The intimate scale of the heads was purposefully made because each of my memories are small instances in time yet collectively form a large influence on the anxieties I have about my health. Color and texture play a large role in the scientific meaning of the work. The casted glaze has a coloration and texture that makes the work appealing and repulsive at the same time. When these pieces are viewed through the magnifying glass the surface resembles those seen in scanning electron micrographs of cancer cells, thus giving an impression that these objects are diseased. The fragile and fleeting appearance of these casted glaze pieces symbolizes the transient nature of human life.

I created the heads using a glaze casting process that I developed. In this process I utilize my knowledge of casting methods and glaze chemistry. I began by creating a clay model from memory rather than of looking at an image or model for reference. This allowed each clay piece to be completely different, like the memories

and emotions I drew from. Once the models were completed I then took plaster molds of the heads and prepared the molds to be filled with glaze. I filled the molds with a glaze and silica sand mixture in the same manner I would fill a slip casting mold, a method that develops a thin layer of glaze on the inside of the mold. I then fired the pieces in the kiln with the plaster mold included. When the pieces were removed from the kiln the chemical water was no longer present in the plaster and the mold crumbled from the final glaze pieces. This process resulted in a piece made entirely glaze.

The illuminated figure is a life size representation of myself. I felt the need to hand build the figure rather than cast it, because casting can often flatten the flesh and make it appear lifeless. I coil built the entire figure using images I had taken of myself for reference. The figure appears healthy in body but not in mind. It is plagued by its constant contemplation of its past and fear of what the future holds. Although it is life sized, the figure still feels small and vulnerable when viewed on the floor in a larger space. The figure is not completely nude. It is wearing underwear because the nude figure, so common in art, has lost the vulnerability of being nude. I left the underwear in place to reference a doctor's visit in which you are asked to disrobe to your underwear, where although you are given a gown, you still feel naked and unnerved at the idea of anyone seeing you in that state.

I projected onto the figure, a series of digital macro of the surfaces of the glaze casted heads in addition to collected scanning electron micrographs of cancer cells. I projected the video from four angles so that every portion of the figure reflected the projected imagery. This projection was made specifically to fit the form

using a method of masking in Photoshop to creating a sort of “skin” on the figure. The resulting surface represents how these anxieties I have about cancer and illness have become a part of me and will remain so for the remainder of my existence.

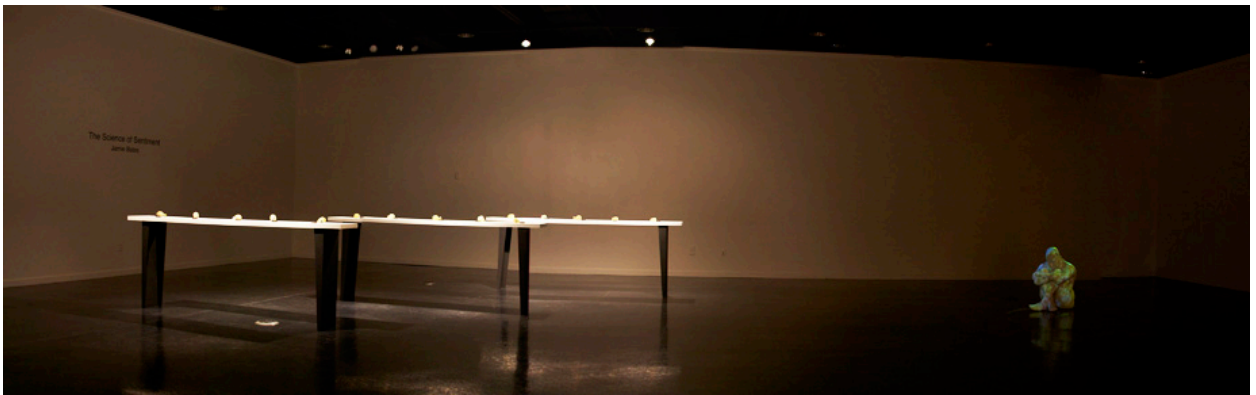
I plan to continue my work with projections and glaze casting. Although I am a ceramic artist and the majority of my work is made of ceramic materials, many would not consider this exhibition to be strictly ceramic. It is the way that I use ceramic materials that allows me to break new ground. Ceramics is a medium with a vast history and as a ceramic artist; I feel it is important to honor that history while attempting to erase some of the boundaries between it and other media. I honor this history in the way I initially work in clay. I build my forms using traditional modeling methods and I often look to both historical and contemporary masters, such as Rodin or Chrystal Boger, for guidance. I attempt to erase boundaries with my approach to surface. Glaze is traditionally fired onto a clay surface, but with my method of casting I have removed the clay from the final product allowing the glaze to become the primary material. Another example of how I approached surface in an alternative fashion is the use of the projected image as a means of creating a transformative surface on the clay figure. For the projected imagery I borrowed techniques from contemporary video mapping processes. Although I used a very primitive form of video mapping in my thesis work, I plan to become more familiar with the software and approaches used in video mapping to develop more complex projects.

This work may shed some light on the person that I have become and why I possess some of the neuroses that I do. It has forced me to acknowledge the role that

my past has played in my work and how these ideas have always interested me but have never been fully explored. I regret that I never had the courage to bring these issues to light before, but I am thankful that I have now. I plan to continue on this journey of self-discovery through deeper examination of my past. This is the most personal work I have ever made but I hope that the viewer can find a way to relate to it. It was never my full intention to make work that is universal but I feel that because it is so personal it has become so.

Works Cited

Greal, L. (1994). Autobiography of a face. Boston, Houghton Mifflin.



Gallery Installation View



Specimen #7



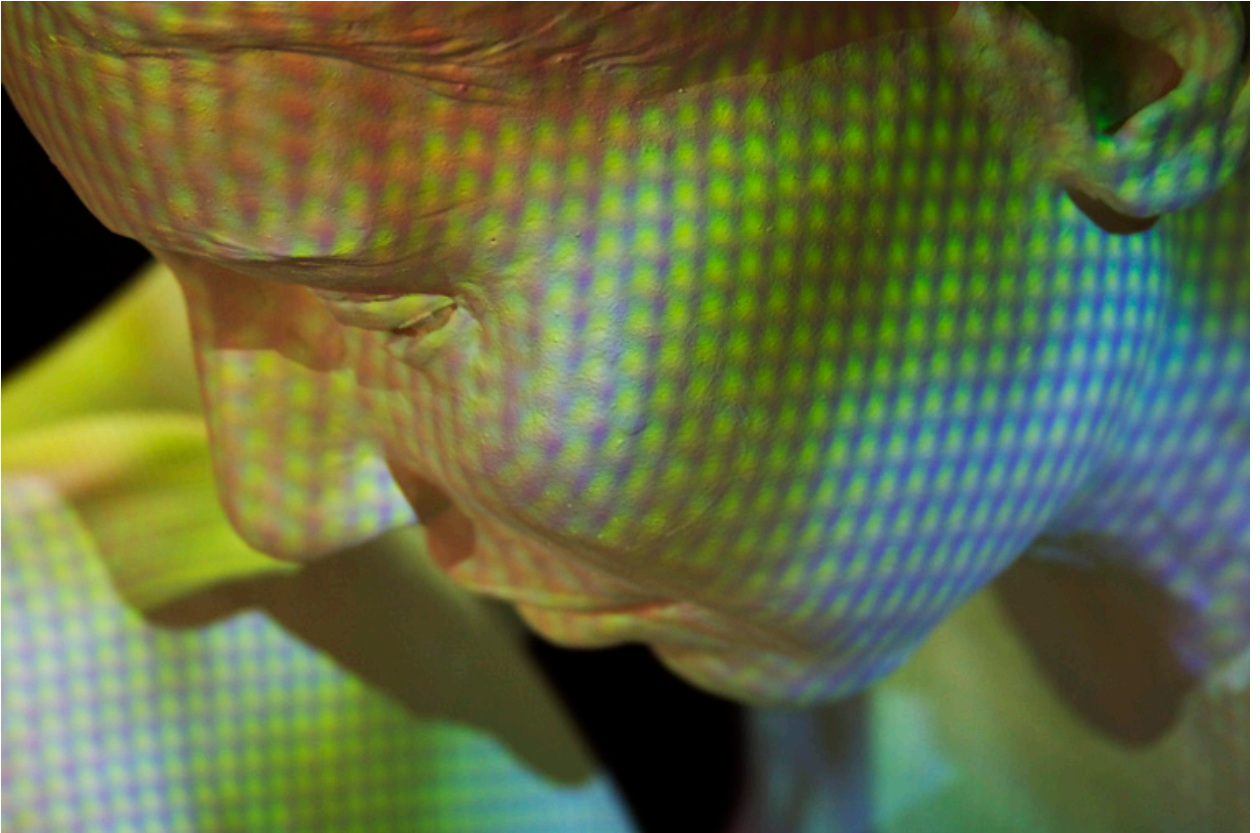
Specimen #13 (Magnified view)



Being (front view)



Being (side view)



Being (detail)



Being (back view)



Being (back view)